

SAGGI

## ***The Intelligent Search: Some Considerations on the Montessori Method***

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*“Within the child is the man he will become”*

The Montessori “method” still today arouses much debate. And for the complexity of the figure of the Italian scientist both for the presence, still large at the international level, of its schools (Cives, 2001).

The educational contents of the method, such as *freedom of inquiry* and the *scientific mind* of the child have found many supporters among educators and students of all ages as well as detractors, as Kilpatrick and his supporters (R. H. Beck, 1920; W. Kilpatrick, 1914).

In her travels in the U.S. A and many other countries, such as India and the Netherlands, the Italian doctor had exposed her theories on the child’s ability to self-manage his educational process, and she had focused on the concept of schools of kids friendly. “An evidence of the correctness of our educational work is the happiness of the child” and also “Never help a child while he is performing a task in which he feels he can succeed” (Montessori, 1909). Montessori pointed primarily on scientific pedagogy, arguing that this would require a new scientific approach in education. She argued that “Children work on their own conquering the active discipline, such as the independence the actual daily life, such as the progressive development of intelligence” (Montessori, 1970, p. 346).

Maria Montessori, as a doctor, holds in great esteem the senses, motor skills of the child, the body united to the mind and, ultimately, intelligence. She has an idea of education that concerns man in his entirety and complexity, and this above all thanks to her studies, including positivism, anthropology and medical science. Due to this, she develops a strong dislike for the verbalism and traditional school systems that limit and condition the natural intelligent search of child. In the method of Maria Montessori there was no space for any kind of *a priori* reflection but she believed in the development of a real observation for each action carried out by children.

The idea of “whole man” is bound to be a “citizen of the world”. Her educational and scientific theories have been consolidated through cultural exchange, the encounter with other cultures and other ways of life. Through her many trips she understood the needs of different cultures and especially the supranational contents of the “method” that she was experiencing and in which much she believed. A method, that had placed at the center of its theory, the liberation of childhood and had actually shown the means and tools to achieve this. *Within the child is the man he will become*, Maria Montessori argued and the school’s task is to encourage children to grow into responsible adults.

All this is not to forget because it is the basis of lasting success, even today, of the Montessori educational lesson (Cives, 1994).

### *The World at Hand*

Montessori, as already said, believed in the scientific approach in education. One of the most important strategies of work, described in detail from her earliest works dedicated to the educational method, is *scientific observation*.

This should not simply look at the child, but all the dynamics that lead him to make discoveries and are based on his spontaneity. To be able to discover things, and learn, the child must have a *world at hand*. An environment more friendly would certainly facilitated the learning and development of personal attitudes, and this was the first step towards the *emancipation* of children. The *environment* in the Montessori method plays a fundamental part. First of all, it must allow free development of the child, allowing him to express itself freely and to perform spontaneous activities.

There are two important elements that are worth sounding better and have been valued by many scholars of Montessori: *scientific observation* and *environment friendly*. The Montessori has his theories on the importance of scientific observation to the two scientists Itard and Séguin, and in their studies she finds the foundations of his educational thought. Any type of measurement can reveal the complexity of human beings, therefore, the scientific observation is “human relationship”. Human beings are transformed through a calibrated relationship between material, mental and environmental objects. This transformation requires study and research.

The object to be observed is complex because each child is characterized by unique aspects. Montessori states the observation, to be scientific, not on an artificial context but in a situation as familiar as that of your own home. She expresses disappointment on traditional school environments which repress every aspect of the child’s spontaneous. With Montessori emerge the image of the *natural child*: he is the expression of creative energy and the future world. Due to this, the school must change its appearance and get rid of coercive ideologies which have homologated the action of teachers. “Ordinarily, even with the best of parents and the best of teachers, the notion still seems to linger that in every child there is a trace of the old Adam which at times must be sternly repressed, even occasionally by corporal punishment. Dr. Montessori’s method

is the exact antithesis of this. Help the child to manifest the good in itself rather than presuppose the evil in its nature” (Burrows, 1912, p. 331). The romantic idea that we had of the child is replaced by a new image of him: he has a rational mind, he is calm, focused in his work and, if the environment helps him, he is responsible for every action he takes and all objects with which he works.

This brings us to another important concept: *self-education*. Giacomo Cives, in his studies dedicated to the great Italian scholar, looks carefully at this issue and considers it one of the most current elements of the Montessori method. The child is the protagonist of the educational process, and he is capable of the highest constructive engagement and re-elaborating. This is carried out not only at the sensory level but also moral, spiritual and intellectual. That ‘s why we can say that Montessori had very complex idea of human nature. *Never help a child while he is performing a task in which he feels he can succeed*: these activities can facilitate the development of *scientific attitude* in children (Cives, 1994).

The environment and the objects in it play a key role in the scientific development of the attitude of the child because the self-education can only be realized with the encounter with the environment. A messy and confusing environment creates chaos in the mind of the child, an environment prepared and organized helps to develop sensitivity, to heal the moral and social aspects of personality, support the intelligence of the child until reaching the early acquisition of writing, which is a process that requires especially clarity and simplicity. Idea is to create an environment suitable for the freedom of the child and this requires structured and diversified materials which allow children to act freely and freely build their own educational path. Always subject to the same objects and other people.

The thought of Montessori is very complex and articulated. The idea of education is linked to that of emancipation, growth, freedom, and, not least, of democracy. We must always remember that behind her proceed supervises a thought that has been formed over time by the exchange between different sciences and this wealth of values and approaches is crucial to give substance to his educational ideal, more and more focused on the ability to self-learning of children.

What role do the adults in this method? “With my method the teacher teaches little, observes a lot, and especially has the function of directing the psychological activities of children and their physiological development. So I changed the name of a teacher in one of director” (Montessori, 1970, p. 179). Teacher must be humble in the sense that he must not substitute to the nature of child, but only remove the barriers that prevent his full and complete unfolding. The teacher does not teach to the child *his truth*; he does not try to transfer to him his knowledge but he *directed* the child’s activities. Activities that allow child to develop his spirit so free; to free his immense energies and potentials that society and the traditional school instead compress relentlessly. “The teacher attitudes toward children’s capabilities did not grow from a philosophical view point imposed on a classroom situation; rather it grew from his close observation of children over a period of years, in which he discovered

that even the very youngest among them were capable of forming an *embryonic society*. Teacher determinate that democracy would be not forced on the children, any more than it should be taken from them. The only way in which it should encouraged would be to prepare the environment in such a way that the democracy would being to evolve naturally” (Lowell Krogh, p. 178). The figure of the teacher is elevated to the level of scientist who observes and interprets the levels of growth and maturation and which is able to structure the environment in such a way as to achieve the first step for the construction of a democratic society (as Dewey had already said).

### *The Child Bearer of Freedom and Builder of Democracy*

In an article of 1964 Martin Mayer strongly criticized the American school because it does not helped the children of the poorer classes on their path of growth and empowerment. Especially the children of the slums that were usually considered as unintelligent and misfits. “Since the Second World War, the gap has steadily widened between the educational accomplishments of middle-class children and of working-class children (particularly of Negro working-class children). Insensibly, our methods of instruction and our curriculum have come to assume greater and greater contribution by the home of education of the child; and where these contributions are lacking, the school are simply ineffective” (Mayer, p. 33). The contributions, he says, are usually distributed in many more schools of the upper classes and is thus creating a vicious circle; “because the school is ineffective, it is assumed that the child is no good, a preposition which is then verified by the class-biased IQ test; and because the child is no good, his teachers must not try to teach him much, for fear damaging his mental health, until he finally emerges from the descending spiral, into the gutter, barely literate and thoroughly incompetent. This procedures is called *democratic*, because teachers are always telling the child about democracy, and supervisors are always telling teachers about democracy, and the supervisors of the supervisors are always telling the public about democracy” (Id.). These are just pretexts to continue to discriminate against the poor, leaving them on the margins of society, says the author who wrote the introduction to the volume of Maria Montessori *The Montessori Method* republished many times and in many different versions in the U.S.A. “But all will agree, with varying enthusiasm, that extensive and intelligent pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs would be a help, and in this context there is no escaping the work of Maria Montessori” (Id.). Montessori was interested not merely in a better system of education but in *human regeneration* and this is a process that is only possible if the school system changes. The scholastic method should serve as an instrument of education for democracy. Between the 20s and the 50s of the last century Montessori offered to the world a new movement of active education that placed at the center *the child builder of democracy and freedom* because the children of Montessori schools could experience firsthand what it means to behave in a democratic manner

within their spaces. The Montessori child is responsible for his actions and because of this he experiences what true democracy: it is what to do with others and for others without losing sight of his individual growth.

The greatness of Montessori method is the earliness with which they develop certain human feelings and attitudes such as generosity, availability and empathy. These attitudes are crucial for building democracy and learn to live in it. But the Montessori school offers children the opportunity to develop them, thanks to the method it offers: freedom of action, but a responsible choice of actions to be taken to avoid damaging the things other children, and to achieve a positive end of the projected. This is not just a practical exercise but it is the result of a free and critical thinking which grows and asserts itself through experience.

“It is not considered that there are two forces in human life: the one on the training period of man (the child) and the one on the social activities of construction (the adult) and that they are so highly integrated that if we do we can't neglect the first to reach the other, we do not consider that to get the rights of the adult we have to go through the child. [...] The first human right, a fundamental right, it must recognize the right of children to be helped to surpass the obstacles that may hinder, suppress, divert his construction energies, removing the security, of one day, becoming man, efficient and balanced. [...] The child has a fundamental role in the human construction. If we recognized the dignity and rights of the workers, must recognize the dignity of the worker who produces the man. Based on this assertion of dignity we must ensure the child has the right and freedom to grow and develop into full bloom, because he can, with all his faculties contribute to human progress, and thus fulfilled the task that nature has entrusted to him” (Montessori, 1952, p. 13).

Montessori recognizes in the child the first manufacturer of democracy because in him is the future of society and society should offer more facilities to help him carry out his task. The school should therefore cultivate the creative energies of child raising his spirit above the brutal human disputes. The scientific pedagogy can help build the most suitable routes to achieving this goal and Montessori worked all her life so that her theories would become instruments of human emancipation.

### *Educating for Democracy: Final Considerations*

The theme of education for democracy lends itself to many different treatments according to the point of view used or spectrum of phenomena under consideration. The concept of education can refer to learning activities or educational training activities extended in time and space, or to specific training techniques and to more general processes of socialization. The concept of democracy can relate to the life of the institutions, the many forms of civic engagement, to the sharing of knowledge and the complexity of human relationships. According to some, democracy itself can be defined as a place of learning and from this point of view, democracy acquires a general meaning: to educate for democracy is democracy itself.

Through civic and cultural activism, the school could become the place to experience the democratic attitude. Montessori thought of a specific action for the construction of shared democratic ideals, to promote a common understanding and to change the conditions of marginalization of the weakest. Have the kids to do these things and that is why that Montessori called them *democracy builders*. Children want to know the reality “live”, without mediation. Children want to be protagonists of their life and this is a natural instinct that they possess. For Montessori is important to invest energy to train this democratic instinct for the creation of a *new humanity* and complete men and this is the primary task of the school. The project Montessori was an innovative project, a project which supported good educational practices. Children have never been passive in this educational dimension but “main actors” and it was perhaps the newest element, which gave democracy a form entirely new. Is this method still actual today? I think it would be wrong to underestimate the contribution that it could be yet to come.

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